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ABSTRACT

A discussion of client evaluation is presented. One of the initial elements in performing an evaluation is "framing the decision context." In framing this context, the evaluator is faced with several key questions, for example, "Who are the decision makers or decision audiences to whom he will be presenting information?" and "What are the likely decisions that will be made as a consequence of information that he might present?" Additional dimensions of the decision context are explicit decision-making purposes, implicit decision-maker motives, developmental stage of programs, and the program's socio-political setting. (CK)

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A NEW ECLECTIC MODEL FOR THE REDIRECTION OF EVALUATION EFFORTS*

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This presentation is billed as "A New Eclectic Model of Evaluation." In all honesty, we must admit to you that the "new" part was not included in our original proposal but seems rather to have been added along the way. Evaluation, or for that matter most social science disciplines, is simply not prone to producing totally new ideas, for in the "soft science" areas there is always someone who has alluded to at least the germ of an idea that we delude ourselves into thinking of as new. (This situation is epitomized by the frequently posed query: How old must an idea be before it is new?). For instance, long before evaluation had matured into a distinct discipline, Alvin Gouldner (1961) suggested a continuum of alternate approaches to consulting that closely parallels current "new" approaches to evaluation efforts. The basic assumption underlying this continuum, termed the "value free" postulate, is that social science cannot formulate and specify objectives for the client group. At one end of this continuum the consulting "engineer" conceives and conducts his assignment largely in terms formulated by his client. In contrast, the consulting "clinician" is less likely to take his client's own values as given and instead derives his own diagnosis based only in small part upon the client's complaints and self-formulations.

The engineering approach has been exemplified most nearly in recent educational evaluation by the writings of Stufflebeam and associates (1971), Provus (1971), Popham (1972) and Alkin (1969, 1971) while the clinical approach has been represented most nearly by the writings of Scriven (1971), Stake (1967) and Glass (1969). The Gouldner notion of clinical evaluators, who are allowed to adopt a "value free" stance in the way in which they perform their evaluations, has its modern-day counterpart in the "goal free" pronouncements of Scriven (1972).

This lengthy set of ramblings is intended simply to point out that possibly there are far fewer "new" ideas than we would like to believe and that our emphasis might well be in concentrating on putting together "old but still good ideas" in eclectic or unique ways. (Having justified the title of our paper, we may proceed with saying what we really wanted to say.)

We start our discussion of evaluation with our philosophical feet squarely placed toward the engineering end of Gouldner's value free continuum. Thus, we see a distinction between evaluation on the one hand and general research on the other; we see a distinction between evaluation attentive to a decision maker's information needs on the one hand and evaluation which establishes its own information priorities and agenda on the other. And, at this end of the continuum, we are committed to working with the client to define a representative and realistic problem statement.

Framing the Decision Context

Given this perspective we have identified one of the critical, initial elements in performing an evaluation as "framing the decision context." That is, in our view one of the most important steps in the evaluation process occurs prior to the kinds of activities that most people think of as evaluation. In this step, the framework in which the rest of the evaluation is to take place is established. Thus, when framing the decision context, the evaluator is faced with several key questions: Who are the decision makers or decision audiences to whom he will be presenting information? What are the likely decisions that will be made as a consequence of information that he might present? What are some of the socio-political factors in this situation that will delimit or modify the kind of evaluation that he might perform? And, in what stage of development is the program that he has been called upon to evaluate?

For purposes of this discussion, and with innumerable caveats about the enormity of the task and the time constraints of this presentation, let us consider five elements of the decision context, as follows: (1) the decision maker(s) and/or decision audiences; (2) the explicit decision-making purposes; (3) the implicit decision-maker motives; (4) the developmental stage of the program to be evaluated; and (5) the socio-political setting. While these five elements are not an entire evaluation model per se (nor are they intended to be), they nonetheless jointly constitute, in our view, the most important step of the evaluation task.

The Decision Maker(s) and Decision Audiences

Identification of the program's decision maker(s) is perhaps the most elusive variable associated with a decision context. Different organizations characteristically have very different decision structures ranging from those in which specific decision responsibility is emphasized to those in which rather amorphous divisions of decision-making responsibility exists. The spectrum of potential decision makers is equally diffuse, ranging from those individuals who have daily contact with the target program to those more distant from the program but who have, for example, provided for its funding. Thus, evaluative information might be used by program staff (teachers), the program director, other program administrators, district administrators, community groups, special interest groups, and program sponsors (state, federal or private granting agency) or Congress.

One of the major problems for the evaluator is identifying the decision audience to whom his reporting will be primarily directed. We would maintain that a single evaluator (or evaluation team) cannot adequately serve two decision makers or audiences simultaneously. "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will stand by the one and

despise the other" (Matthew: 6:24). The important thing is, however, that the evaluator be quite clear as to which decision maker or audience he has responsibility for evaluation information reporting. General purpose information provision cannot be considered evaluation.

Explicit Decision-Making Purposes

A variety of potential decision makers implies that there will be a potential variety of decision-making purposes. Even if a particular decision maker is identified, there are many possible kinds of decisions that might be contemplated. Some of the decisions that might be anticipated include program change and modification as a result of the evaluation, refunding, personnel changes, program adoption, or program generalization. Careful examination and an attempt to make explicit the avowed decision purposes is an essential element in framing the decision context.

The issue of evaluator-decision maker responsibility and conflicting decision purposes needs clarification before an evaluator can proceed very far in his task. For example, consider the ambiguity that presently exists for an evaluator engaged in the evaluation of a Title VII bilingual project in a school district. First, let us assume that the evaluator was selected by the individual Title VII project director. One of his prime responsibilities is for the provision of formative evaluation data to that local project director to assist him in making program modifications. Second, there is a requirement within the project for a "final report." Several potential decisions will emanate from such a report. On the one hand, the district superintendent or assistant superintendent will review the report in order to make judgments about the quality of the program for potential implementation elsewhere in the district. A hidden agenda item will involve making judgments about the effectiveness of the project

director. The report on the outcome of the program will also be sent to the Title VII program monitors at the U.S. Office of Education for their review. Presumably the decision question that they have in mind would be something like, "Is this project working and should funding be increased, renewed, decreased, or terminated?" Now, consider the dilemma of the poor evaluator who attempts to provide direct information for these three decision needs simultaneously.

We are not suggesting that framing the decision context, and in particular being aware of the decision makers for whom information is to be provided and the particular decision needs of each, will solve the plight of the Title VII evaluator. (The dilemma faced by these poor souls seems to place them in a position beyond redemption.) What is instead suggested is that if the evaluator will initially identify the decision makers of concern in his evaluation and seek clarification of his role and function vis-à-vis each of them, he will save himself a great deal of effort, produce more relevant findings, and have a better basis for justifying the soundness of his work.

Implicit Decision-Maker Motives

A third dimension of decision-making context, which is related to is explicit purpose, is the implicit motives of the decision maker for commissioning the evaluation. The distinction between the explicit and implicit dimensions of the decision-maker activities is not absolute but rather is based on how the decision maker intends to use the evaluative information. Explicit decisions, such as those discussed in the previous section, are generally characterized by well-defined decision areas requiring very specific kinds of information. Implicit motives, on the other hand, frequently involve the commissioning of an evaluation and its subsequent performance as a pro forma exercise; the act of having conducted an evaluation is the crucial element, and the specific evaluation information is most

frequently irrelevant. Implicit decisions can be quite important and should not be viewed as peripheral or illegitimate for lack of a formal decision purpose. Thus, some implicit decision-maker motives might be (1) the satisifaction of legal requirements -- "The legislation says we've got to do an evaluation, so do it but don't bug us too much"; (2) justification of the program -- "We know our program is superb and simply want to have an evaluator document this"; (3) public relations -- "We are a lighthouse school district and since evaluation is popular we would like our community to know that we did one"; (4) professional prestige -- "I am an administrator on the move and it would help my image as a progressive educator to have commissioned an evaluation"; (5) community pressures or pressures from within the school system -- "An evaluation will help to get them off our backs."

This is a most disheartening list of raisons d'etre for an evaluation. Yet, the list is believable by all but those naive to the field.

Developmental Stage of Programs

Another important element to be considered in framing the decision context is the developmental stage of the program. Just as individuals in their life cycles go through developmental stages, so too must we consider an education program as a living, growing entity that proceeds through various developmental stages. During a program's childhood, or the planning stage, program developers must define those goals and objectives they wish to address and select the most appropriate program to meet these ends. A program's adolescence, or formative years, typically requires close parental supervision in order to assure that the desired program has been implemented as planned and is making satisfactory progress. Any problems that arise during this developmental stage should be immediately treated by introducing needed modifications and changes. In this fashion a program can improve as it matures. Finally upon reaching adulthood

(the completed product stage), a program's outcome and impact will be judged by society.

Thus, we conceive of three basic developmental stages of programs: the planning stage, the formative stage, and the product stage. In turn, each stage consists of two substages as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Stages of Program Development

Planning Stage (Childhood)
Goal Definition
Program Selection
Formative Stage (Adolescence)
Program Implementation
Monitoring Progress
Completed Product (Adulthood)
Outcome
Impact

An evaluator should be aware of two characteristics of these developmental stages of educational programs. (1) Developmental stages while "time-related" are not "time-bound." Thus, while there is a sequence of program developmental stages, it is not guaranteed that all programs will attain these stages in a particular time span. (2) The explicit decision purposes for which the evaluator has ostensibly been retained to provide information may not correspond with the stage of development of the program. Thus, an evaluator may be asked to provide information appropriate to decisions in the formative stage while the program, in the completeness and specificity of its development, has not attained that stage.

This type of situation occurs when an evaluator is asked to provide a formative evaluation in order to provide information for program modification when the program itself has not been developed to the extent that one would know what was an anticipated part of the program and what would be a modification. Clearly, it is difficult to attend to the consideration of program modification when the nature of the program itself has not yet been well defined, yet this is a frequent occurrence.

An evaluator must decide what to do in such an instance. In our work we have followed the tack of forcing the completion of prior developmental stages before commencing activities towards the avowed purpose of the evaluation. Frequently this has meant that prior developmental stages (prior to the stage for which evaluation is requested) are approximated and parts of the various stages are completed simultaneously; these approximations become assumptions for the work that is to follow. Sometimes the penetrating questions of the evaluator, pinpointing the inadequacy of the prior development of the program, is sufficient feedback to stimulate the reconsideration, attention, and focus of the program on its appropriate developmental stage.

The Program's Socio-political Setting

An educational program exists in a socio-political setting which has defineable dimensions. The size and scope of the target program as well as the nature of the community(ies) uniquely frame an evaluation effort. Indeed, the program itself can be placed within the political context of other school districts, lines of administrative responsibility and interacting programs.

An organization's or program's socio-political setting represents an area of continued research and scholarly activity (Bind,1970; Ferman, 1969; Gordon, 1973) which evaluators have all to frequently ignored. For example, Ferman has studied evaluation from the perspective of a system of social

interaction involving the evaluator, sponsor and program staff, while Bind has considered three problem areas that reflect a program's social setting.

The Total Evaluation Effort

In this presentation we have focused on the first step of the evaluation -- framing the decision context. If we were to develop this paper into a broader treatise on evaluation, similar attention and delineation would be directed to the evaluation steps that follow. The appropriate titles for some of these steps might be: Building the Evaluation System, Techniques and Methodologies, and Evaluation Information and Reporting. In each of these areas old but still useful ideas on evaluation might be pulled together in an eclectic fashion to provide "new" insights into the nature of evaluation.

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